

Prometheus

A Greek myth
Retold by W.T. JEWKES

You will remember how Prometheus the Titan made man out of clay and helped his cousin Zeus to win the war of rebellion against Cronus. One would think that he might have won Zeus's undying thanks, but unfortunately for Prometheus, he presumed too much on Zeus's gratitude. As a result he made Zeus angry and had to suffer severe punishment.

Prometheus was very pleased with man but felt that there was a great deal left to be desired in his creation. His brother, Epimetheus, whose name means "he who thinks afterward," had had a hand in helping him make man; but true to his name, he had used up all his raw materials in giving man just a body more versatile than that of the animals. Prometheus realized that in this state man would not know how to take advantage of his upright posture. What man needed, he saw, was to have the chance to develop his mind. Athene, the goddess of wisdom, had already given Prometheus the knowledge of how to build houses, to add and subtract, to chart a course by the stars, to heal illness, and these, and many other useful arts, he soon passed on to mankind. But still man did not have enough to satisfy Prometheus. So he decided to give man the divine gift of fire.

At first Zeus did not seem to object to this idea. But trouble came when Prometheus played a joke on Zeus. It began one day when the gods were gathered together to decide which portions of the sacrificial bull should be offered to them as a gift. Since he was the most clever god, Prometheus was asked to make the decision.

"Well," he said, thinking to show them how silly they were to argue over such a matter, "give me an hour or two and I will have an answer for you."

So while the gods went off for a noontime nap, Prometheus took a bull, killed it, dismembered it, and flayed its hide. Then he made two bags from the hide. Into one he stuffed all the flesh of the bull; and on top of the flesh, at the mouth of the bag, he stuffed the bull's stomach, the least tempting part of the animal. Into the other bag, he put first the bones and then on top, at the mouth of the bag, he placed the animal's juicy fat.

When the gods returned in the early afternoon, they saw the two bags placed on a large flat stone.

"Now," said Prometheus craftily, "I've decided that the best way to resolve the argument is to let Zeus be guided by what he sees. Let the father of the gods and men choose which of these two bags he most would like. Whatever the bag contains shall hereafter be the portion of sacrifice given to the gods."

Zeus was pleased at the idea and quickly stepped up to inspect the bags. Of course, he let his greedy eyes be his guide and chose the bag whose mouth was stuffed with the fragrant fat. When the rest of the contents of the bag had been dumped on the ground, however, and he saw only a pile of dry bones, Zeus knew he had been tricked. He was furious.

"Very well, Prometheus," he raged, "so you want to make me look a fool before the other gods, do you? Well, you'll be sorry you did! You want to give mankind the gift of fire, but now you can't. I won't allow it. Let men eat their flesh raw, just as they always have!"

But Prometheus was a very persistent god. A few days later, when he thought that perhaps Zeus would not be looking, he got Athene to let him steal at night into the fire-chamber of Olympus by the back door. There, in the center of the chamber stood the flaming chariot of the sun, where Apollo had left it after its day's journey. He took a rush torch that was lying in a corner of the hall, lit it from the fiery chariot, and soon had a bright, live piece of charcoal. This he put into the hollow stalk of a giant fennel that he had brought with him, to keep it glowing, but also to hide its light. Then he quickly stole out of the chamber and came down to earth where men were sleeping. Quietly he gathered together some dry leaves and twigs, and putting his live coal in amongst them, he soon had a blazing bonfire going. At last he stepped behind a large oak tree to watch what would happen.

As it grew light, the men who dwelt near the grove got up from their beds of fern to begin the tasks of the day. Soon the news of the strange new spirit, bright as the sun, hot like the sun, so hot that it

devoured logs and branches with noisy greed, spread throughout the region. Men came and gathered around the place, gazing in wonder and awe. Soon the bolder ones moved near to the fire, but it was so hot that they quickly retreated. Prometheus watched for a while, delighted with his exploit, but soon it became clear to him that he would have to instruct men in how to treat this new plaything, so that they remained in control. It would not do for fire to become their master instead of their servant. So he stepped out from behind the oak tree and called the men to him.

"This is a gift that I bring to you from Olympus, mortals. It is called 'fire,' and is stolen from the sun. But it's a dangerous gift and you must learn to treat it well. It is greedy for wood and needs to be fed constantly, but if you feed it too much, it will rage out of control and kill you. If ever it does get out of control, you can subdue it with only one thing—water. Treat it with respect and it will be the key to much happiness."

At first the men were afraid at what Prometheus told them. Stolen from the sun? Brought down from Olympus? Surely it was death to meddle with such a thing. But Prometheus meanwhile had taken up the raw haunches of a deer that lay close by. Spitting them on a sharp stick, he held them over the fire, and soon the tempting smell of roast venison brought the men hungrily to the fire's edge. In no time at all they were gulping down the delicious, hot morsels greedily. Then Prometheus showed them how to make torches by dipping branches in pitch and igniting them at the fire. He showed them also how to smelt metal from the ore in rocks. All in all, he thought, surveying men as they happily and busily went about practicing their new skills, a good day's work.

But that night Zeus happened to look down from Olympus onto the face of the earth, and there he saw something that his eyes could hardly believe. All over the landscape he spotted the glow of fires, and by the firelight he saw men cooking their food, warming their cold hands. The fires were driving back the darkness. Some men had made crude forges on which they were already beating out rough weapons, and plowshares, and nails; and iron bands to bind planks together to make ships. Others were fashioning iron rims for the wheels of chariots. Others were refining gold from the earth and making ornaments and coins. It was not hard for Zeus to guess who had been responsible for this. Only one god would have had the gall to defy his command.

In his rage, he let out a roar of thunder that split the heavens in two and sent mortals scurrying into their caves and huts.

"Prometheus!" he shouted. "Where's Prometheus? Let him come here at once. If he won't come, bring him by force!"

But Prometheus was already nearby. He knew there would be trouble, but he approached the cloud-gatherer's throne boldly. Zeus frowned blackly on him.

"What have you done, you fool?" he demanded hotly. "You knew my command. Man was not to have the gift of fire. No god can defy my power and get away with it!"

"Father of the gods and men," replied Prometheus quietly, "I won't say I did obey your command. But surely, it seemed to me, you would take pity on the race of men. See how much happier they are, now that they have fire."

"Maybe they are and maybe they aren't," Zeus stormed. "Now that they have that gift, there's no telling what they'll do. Soon they will be so proud of their accomplishments that they will think they are as great as the gods. Who knows, they might even try to storm Olympus itself!"

"Whatever they do, they can never be as powerful as you," declared Prometheus reassuringly. "You can always destroy them if they do."

"I'm not going to wait that long," raged the thunderer. "I'm going to consume them all now, once and for all, in the hugest fire you ever saw!"

But Zeus had second thoughts.

"On the other hand," he said, "I think I'll have myself some sport. What you say is true—I can always destroy them if they storm heaven. In the meantime, I think I'll watch them with their new plaything. I'm not so sure it will bring them only happiness. Soon, mark my words, they'll be at war in those chariots, killing one another with those swords and spears. Maybe they'll do the job for me."

"But you," he went on, turning to Prometheus with his eyes flashing, "you will have to be punished for your disobedience!"

So the king of Olympus called two gods, Power and Violence, to serve as guards of Prometheus. Then he turned to Hephaestus, the lame blacksmith of heaven.

"Hephaestus," he ordered, "you go along with Prometheus and his guards. They are taking him to the rocky slope of the Caucasus."

When you get there, I want you to forge the strongest iron fetters you can fashion and chain this criminal to the rocks with them. There he will stay forever, to bear the scorching heat of the sun by day and the bitter cold at night. And I will send an eagle to nest nearby. Each day, it will swoop down and tear the prisoner's liver out, piece by piece. And each night the liver will repair itself, ready to make a meal for the bird the next day."

And so it was done. There Prometheus remained in torture for many and many a year. He would have been there still, except that Zeus finally relented and allowed one of the heroes to rescue him. The hero's name was Heracles. But that is another story.

What human qualities does Prometheus have?

Prometheus suffered for helping people. What effect would this story of divine sacrifice have on the people who told it?

The gift of fire drove back the darkness, and Prometheus told the people it would be the key to much happiness. But Zeus prophesied that it would bring an even greater darkness. Which prophecy do you think has been fulfilled?

Old Man

A Crow Indian myth
Retold by ELLA E. CLARK

Long before there was any land and before there was any living thing except four little ducks, the Creator, whom we call Old Man, came and said to the ducks, "Which one of you is brave?"

"I am the bravest," replied one duck.

"Dive into the water," Old Man said to the duck, "and get some dirt from the bottom. I will see what I can do with it."

The brave duck went down and was gone a long time. It came up again carrying on its beak some dirt that it gave to Old Man. He held it in his hand until it became dry. Then he blew the dirt in all directions and thus made the land and the mountains and the rivers.

Old Man, who was all-powerful, was asked by the ducks to make other living things. So he took more dirt in his hand and, after it had dried, he blew it off. And there stood a man and a woman, the first Crow Indians. Old Man explained to them how to increase their number. At first they were blind; when their eyes were opened and they saw their nakedness, they asked for something with which to clothe themselves.

So that they might have food and clothing, Old Man took the rest of the dirt brought up by Duck and made animals and plants. Then he killed one of the buffalo he had made, broke a rock, and with one of the pieces cut up the animal. Then he explained its parts and told the man and woman how to use them.

"To carry water," he said, "take the pouch from the inside of the buffalo and make a bucket. Make drinking cups from its horns and also from the horns of the mountain sheep. Use the best pieces of buffalo for food. When you have had enough to eat, make a robe from the hide."

ploring; and in the midst of the howling of the wind and volleying of the thunder the magazine blew up, the earthquake rent the ground wide and the castle's wreck and ruin tumbled into the chasm, which swallowed it from sight and closed upon it, with all that innocent life, not one of the five hundred poor creatures escaping.

Our hearts were broken, we could not keep from crying.

"Don't cry," Satan said, "they were of no value."

"But they are gone to hell!"

"Oh, it is no matter, we can make more."

It was of no use to try to move him; evidently he was wholly without feeling, and could not understand. He was full of bubbling spirits, and as gay as if this were a wedding instead of a fiendish massacre. And he was bent on making us feel as he did, and of course his magic accomplished his desire. It was no trouble to him, he did whatever he pleased with us. In a little while we were dancing on that grave, and he was playing to us on a strange sweet instrument which he took out of his pocket; and the music—there is no music like that, unless perhaps in heaven, and that was where he brought it from, he said. It made one mad, for pleasure, and we could not take our eyes from him, and the looks that went out of our eyes came from our hearts, and their dumb speech was worship. He brought the dance from heaven, too, and the bliss of paradise was in it.

How is the Mysterious Stranger like Prometheus, yet unlike him?

How does Mark Twain feel about the gods who control the universe?
What experiences might make someone feel this way?

Dionysos

A Greek myth
Retold by PADRAIC COLUM

A ship lay in a harbor; on a headland that overlooked the harbor a youth appeared. He wore a purple cloak; his hair was rich, dark, and flowing; his face was beautiful. The sailors on the ship thought that he must be a king's son, or a young king's brother. They were Tyrrhenian sea rovers, and they knew that they could never be called to account for anything that they did in that place. So they made a plan to seize the youth and hold him for ransom, or else sell him into slavery in some far land.

They seized him and they brought him on board the ship in bonds. He did not cry out; he sat upon the deck with a smile on his lips and a gleam in his dark eyes. And when the helmsman looked upon him he cried out to his companions, "Madmen, why have ye done this? I tell you that the one whom you have bound is one of the Olympians! Come! Let us set him free at once! Do not have him turn his rage against us, or the winds and the sea may be stirred up against our ship. I tell you that not even our well-built ship can carry such a one as he!"

But the master of the ship laughed at the words of the helmsman. "Madman yourself," he said, "with your talk of Olympians!" He gave command to have the ship taken out of that harbor. Then to the helmsman he said, "Leave the business of dealing with our prize to us. Mark the wind, you, and help to hoist the sail. As for the youth we have taken, I know what kind of a fellow he is. He will say nothing; he will keep smiling there. But soon he will talk, I warrant you! He will tell us where his friends and his brothers are, and how much we are likely to get by way of ransom for him. Or else he will stand in the market place until we find out what price he will fetch."

So the master of the sea rovers spoke, and the mast went up; the

sail was hoisted; the wind filled it, and the ship went over the sparkling sea. The sea rovers sang, well content with all they had accomplished. Then, as they went here and there, making taut the sheets, they saw things that made them marvel. What was this that poured upon the deck, giving such fragrance? Could it be wine? Wine it was, and of a marvelous taste! Could that be fresh ivy that was spreading around the mast—ivy with dark-green leaves and berries? Could that be a vine that was growing along the sail—a vine with bunches of grapes growing from it? And what was this greenery that was garlanding the thole pins? The sea rovers marveled. Then, suddenly, their marveling was turned to fright. There was a lion on the ship—it was filled with his roarings. The sailors fled to where the helmsman was and they crowded about him. "Turn back—turn back the ship!" They cried. And then the lion sprang upon the master of the ship and seized him; the lion shook him and then flung him into the sea. The sailors waited for no more; they sprang into the sea, every man of them. The helmsman was about to spring into the sea after them. He looked around him; there was no lion there. He saw the youth they had taken aboard; the bonds were no longer upon him; there was a smile on his lips and in his dark eyes, and on his brow was a wreath of ivy rich with berries. The helmsman threw himself on the deck before him. "Take courage, man," said the youth, now known, indeed, for one of the Olympians. "The others have been changed to dolphins in the sea. You have found favor with me. And I am Dionysos whom Semele bore to Zeus."

He was that god who was so marvelously born. Zeus, lord of the thunder, had loved Semele, the daughter of King Kadmos. She had begged her lover to show himself to her in all the splendor of his godhead. Zeus came to her in his radiance; then Semele was smitten and consumed and the life went from her.

Zeus took her unborn child; opening his thigh he laid the unborn thing within and had the flesh sewn over it. The child was born from the thigh of Zeus upon Mount Nysa, in a secret place, remote from the presence of Hera, the spouse of Zeus. The nymphs of the mountain received the child from Zeus; they took him to their bosoms and reared him in the dells of Nysa. He was fed on ambrosia and nectar, the food of the Immortals. He grew up in an ivy-covered cave that was filled with the scent of flowers and of grapes.

He grew into a stripling; then he wandered through the wooded valleys of Mount Nysa, a wreath of ivy always upon his brow. The

nymphs followed him, and the woods and valleys were filled with their outcries. A king who heard these outcries, who saw the ivy-crowned stripling and the nymphs following him with wands in their hands, became enraged at the sight. Lykourgos was that king's name. He had his men chase them, striking at the nymphs and at Dionysos with their heavy ox goads. The nymphs flung their wands upon the ground and flew to the mountaintop. Dionysos went down to the sea-shore. As for Lykourgos, he was smitten with blindness; he did not stay long amongst men afterwards, for he was hated by the immortal gods.

Now the ship with the faithful helmsman in charge of it brought Dionysos to the island of Naxos. There the daughter of King Minos, Ariadne, became his bride. He went to Egypt and was received with honor by the King of Egypt; he went to India and had his dwelling place by the River Ganges. And everywhere he went he showed men how to grow the vine and how to make wine that gladdens hearts and liberates minds from their close-pressing cares.

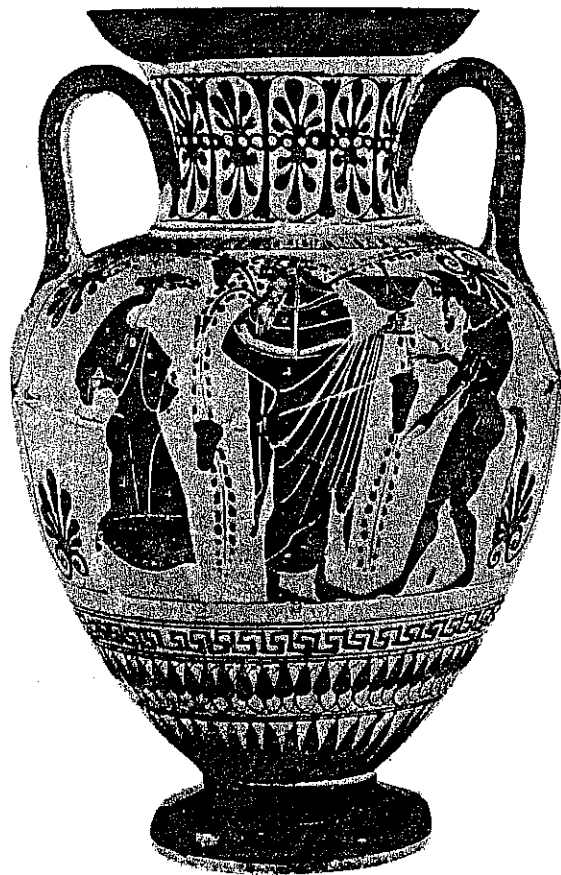
And everywhere he went women followed him; they had a frenzied joy from being near him; they danced; they clashed cymbals; they kept up revels that were hidden from men. With trains of women attending him, Dionysos turned back to the land he was born in. He went riding in a car that was drawn by leopards that the King of India had given him, and on his brow was a wreath of ivies and of vine leaves.

So he came back to Thebes—to Thebes that had been ruled over by Kadmos, the father of Semele. Kadmos was an old man now, and he had given the rule of the country to Pentheus, his daughter's son. Dionysos came, saying that he was the son of Semele, and Pentheus denounced him as an impostor. Then the women of Thebes, neglecting their households, joined the band that followed Dionysos and had their revels in the mountains—revels which no man was allowed to look upon. Pentheus became more and more angered at what his subjects, under the influence of this rover from India, were being brought to think and do.

He forbade the growing of the vine in Thebes; he would not allow the Thebans to make or to drink wine. And this he did, although his father, a wine cup in his hand, came before him, and warned him against persecuting the followers of Dionysos.

He shut Dionysos in his prison house, and he followed the women of Thebes to their secret meeting place on the top of the mountain. He

climbed a pine tree so that he might overlook their revels. And he was there when the women saw him. In a frenzy they dashed to the tree; they tore the man out of its branches. Pentheus saw the women threatening him; he saw his own mother Agave there—the foremost amongst them. She did not know him, but kept crying, "A boar, a boar has come amongst us; destroy this boar." They tore at him; they tore the body of Pentheus to pieces, his own mother, Agave, in her frenzy, leading the others on. So Pentheus perished, and so Dionysos triumphed in the land where Semele saw her divine lover in his splendor and was crushed by his radiance and his might.



Dionysos, the last god to be admitted as an Olympian, was not entirely divine. How did his birth set him apart from mortals, as well as from the other gods? What miraculous powers does the god have?

What gifts does Dionysos give to the human race? What happened to the mortals who refused to accept the god's gifts?

The fire brought by Prometheus to earth was a two-edged gift. It could bring happiness, but it could also cause destruction. How is the gift brought by Dionysos associated with joy and freedom, as well as with grief and brutality? Is Twain's Mysterious Stranger in any way like Dionysos? How is he different from the god?

The drawing that opens this unit shows an artist's conception of a modern god-teacher. This computer seems to be balancing precariously on a tight rope and heading toward a dangerous ring of fire. Describe an imaginary god-teacher of your own. What powers set this god-teacher apart from those he or she teaches? Can the god-teacher's gift bring joy as well as grief?